

VIII. THE MODERN ERA

CDs evolve and morph, Downloads take over

Perhaps the saddest and most uncomfortable result of the digital era has been not merely the “dumbing-down” of the listening audience, which was bound to happen in a culture where Sports is the new god and working like a football player—which is to say, long hours, hard hitting and being a team player—is the new societal model, but the “dumbing-down” of music offered to the public. Just as smooth jazz has all but killed real jazz, so too the influx of smooth classical has almost completely obliterated any interest in music that grips the heart, engages the mind, or shatters emotions.

Like all such movements in music, the seeds for this “revolution of the smooth” actually started several years before it took root in our culture. In a sense, it began with the incredible popularity of those DG and London Phase 4 discs, the RCA Dynagrooves and Columbia Quadraphonics. The sounds emanating from one’s speakers was very rarely the emotional, gritty sounds of Toscanini, Böhm or even Solti, but the smoother productions of Stokowski, von Karajan, and other conductors whose work eventually paved the way for “soft sound” acceptance.

Conductors go “smooth”: No more angst

In the late 1960s James Levine, at that time a young conducting pupil of George Szell, came to the Metropolitan Opera. With his incisive rhythms, cohesive musical structuring and impeccable control of the orchestra, he attracted immediate attention by listeners and critics alike. By the late 1970s he was the music director of the Metropolitan Opera as well as of the Ravinia Festival in Chicago. From there he has gone on from strength to strength, conducting and directing orchestras around the world, yet always maintaining the Met as his base – rather the opposite of previous great conductors.



Levine’s musical approach is a fine, all-purpose one but, like Szell himself, somewhat generic. He is at his best in Italian opera and Mozart, less happy in Wagner which he conducts too slowly. His symphonic recordings, as a whole, are largely disappointing and forgettable, the lone exception being an early recording of the Mahler Fourth Symphony with the Chicago Symphony that many (myself included) consider definitive. Yet because of his omnipresence on the musical scene, and the prominent push given to him by his various record labels (first RCA, then DGG and Sony Classical), Levine has had an enormous influence on the listening values of two generations. And in his wake came

many more conductors even less interesting than he, particularly James Conlon (one of his protégés), Esa-Pekka Salonen, Kurt Masur and Paavo Järvi.

In addition to these, other conductors who worked extensively in England and America came to impress slower and stodgier readings of the classics on the CD-buying public. One of

the most insidious was Reginald Goodall, whose “Wagner-in-English” recordings of the 1970s had an enormous impact on the emerging cultural scene. Like Karajan, Levine and early Solti, Goodall’s Wagner was agonizingly slow, bringing the music to the breaking-point without capturing the tension-and-release exhibited by such masters as Furtwängler in even his slowest recorded performances. And, indeed, the early-1970s release of Furtwängler’s RAI “Ring Cycle,” his slowest on record, further impressed “slow Wagner” on the minds of record-buyers, even though many of them could not, apparently, tell the difference between his gentle but persistent nudging forward of the tempo whereas the others mentioned let it drag to a halt. As previously mentioned, Böhm’s Wagner was the antithesis of this: lively, pointed, well-paced yet dramatic. But Böhm, except for his slow Mozart which he was supposedly the “dean” of, was largely ignored by the record companies.

Twenty years after he performed it, his mid-‘70s “Tristan und Isolde” with Birgit Nilsson and Jon Vickers has become an underground classic, but had it been issued at the time it would undoubtedly have been marginalized by those who preferred slower Wagner—as, in fact, Fritz Reiner’s 1936 “Tristan” with Flagstad and Melchior has been criticized for much the same reasons. It is one of the great ironies of modern listening that slower tempi have come to be seen not as an interesting alternative to the more correct quicker tempi, but *preferred*. Indeed, even such a “musician’s musician” as

conductor Pierre Boulez, whose conducting is generally hailed as “correct” even though it is emotionally cold, conducts his Wagner slowly in deference to what is now perceived as “pro-



per” Wagnerian style. Largely, this is because the recordings of Furtwängler and Toscanini—extraordinary maestri who knew how to achieve forward propulsion even when they conducted slowly—have influenced many who hear the slow speeds but have no idea how to sustain the older conductors’ momentum.

On the other hand, some of the most talented of latter-day conductors, Levine, Colin Davis, Solti and Gardiner, had an enormous and fascinating influence on Mozart conducting. By balancing the extraordinarily rapid speeds that Mozart himself wanted with a more relaxed approach that focused on the meaning of the text and harmonic



relationships between scenes, these conductors and a few others have managed to improve on both the groundbreaking recordings and performances of Krips and Erich Kleiber and the more romantic Mozart of Karl Böhm. This has, in turn, influenced live performances of these works worldwide, with the result that today's Mozart is both more accurately sung and more vigorously acted than at any time in the past century, without incurring the excesses of 1950s and '60s Mozart with cannon voices doing the work more suitable for sleek arrows.

Meanwhile, instrumentalists began to tend towards a more generic blandness in their interpretations as well. Following on the heels of American violinist Isaac Stern, such players as Itzhak Perlman, Pinchas Zukerman and Ann-Sophie Mutter, for all their glorious tones, presented listeners with a generally smoother, less "edge-free" sound and similarly smoother interpretations of the music. In the 1990s, the phenomenal Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg and Joshua Bell emerged, with far edgier, more intense interpretations of the literature, yet despite the push of major labels they have never really caught on with the public. In Salerno-Sonnenberg's case, ironically, this stemmed as much from her appearance as her playing: thin, muscular and boyish-looking, EMI has tried desperately (and without success) to "pretty her up" for her album covers.

Pianists, too, suffered from continuing blandness. Throughout the 1970s, for instance, the most consistently praised classical pianist of his time was Vladimir Ashkenazy, a formidable technician who had little or nothing to offer beyond good phrasing. But Ashkenazy's success led to a continuing series of bland pianists, from Alicia de Larrocha to Adawagin Pratt, whose work is not only highly touted by their labels but willingly accepted by listeners as great art. One of the most tragic examples of an individual artist becoming more generic was Barry Douglas, the fine Irish pianist who won the Tchaikovsky Competition at a time when it was still being held in the Soviet Union. His incendiary performance of Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" led to a bevy of recordings by RCA, but whether due to external pressures or an internal loss of fire, his readings became increasingly more generic and less interesting.



This is not to say, of course, that great artists do not appear or are not promoted by various labels, or that a gentler musical approach to standard repertoire does not occasionally work wonders. Murray Perahia, for instance, has elicited some extraordinarily beautiful things in some of the Mozart piano concerti, and Irish pianist John O'Connor has virtually redefined the Beethoven piano sonatas in the most arresting and individual way since Artur Schnabel by infusing lyricism—and a logical structure—into passages that are often pounded out. In addition, O'Connor's sense of rhythm in the syncopated passages, especially in the late sonatas, is much freer than that of earlier pianists, undoubtedly the

influence (conscious or unconscious) of seven decades of hearing jazz. But I think it takes an extraordinarily subtle and well-informed musical mind to make such determinations; to the average listener, the playing of Perahia and O'Connor sounds merely "pretty," no better or worse than any other classical pianist being presented by the record labels.

Two new singers: the Alagnas

In the early 1990s, two new singers emerged who would eventually come to dominate the opera world in their own way as Callas and Di Stefano had come to dominate the 1950s. They were tenor Roberto Alagna and soprano Angela Gheorghiu, physically attractive and vocally gifted artists who listened to recordings constantly for inspiration. In researching their roles, they listened to as many greats of the past in their respective music as they could, thus synthesizing the best interpretive moments of earlier artists with their own individual personalities. To some listeners, particularly older ones, this kind of synthesis was not only deceptive but artificial. They decried their use of others' interpretations to build their own formation of a role in their own light. But to many, including such experienced musicians as Sir Georg Solti and Michel Plasseon, these singers' twin passions for bringing out the best in both musical *and* dramatic interpretation came as a godsend. It was not surprising to those who knew either singer that they would be attracted to each other, and eventually married.

It has also been said that the Alagnas' passion for the very highest standards of their art has made them arrogant. They both, but especially Gheorghiu, have been known to walk out of rehearsals—or not even show up for them—if they feel that they do not meet their high standards. But the same was also said of Chaliapin, Olivero, Vickers, Kathleen Battle and even sometimes of Callas. Singers who strive for excellence at every turn in their performances are always criticized when their colleagues are found to be lacking; and none can claim that, when either or both of them give a performance, that it is not of the very highest caliber.

Ironically, because of their penchant for choosiness in performing, the Alagnas are best known to the majority of opera-lovers through *their* recordings, just as Callas and Di Stefano were. And thanks to their great commercial appeal, an appeal enhanced by their physical attractiveness, they became the best-selling operatic duo of their time for about a decade, recording virtually their entire repertoire as a team. Joining them in many of their ventures was American baritone Thomas Hampson, yet another modern singer



who listens extensively to recordings to formulate his own interpretations of roles (as well as lieder, a field in which the Alagnas have not yet ranged). Among their finest souvenirs are recordings of the “full opera” version of Bizet’s “Carmen” with sung recitatives by Ernest Giraud, in which Gheorghiu’s sexy elegance is offset by Alagna’s Vickers-like psychotic Don José, and Verdi’s “Il Trovatore,” in which the soprano’s noble Leonore is partnered by a Manrico whose confusion between his love for her and the savage violence instigated by his mother, Azucena, creates an emotional conflict that is palpable even on disc. Individually, too, they have created memorable moments on disc. Gheorghiu’s Violetta in “La Traviata,” recorded live at London’s Covent Garden with Solti conducting when she was still a teenager, set a standard that has rarely been matched since; and Alagna’s Don Carlo in the opera of the same name, in which he was partnered by the great Finnish soprano Karita Mattila and (again) his favored colleague Hampson, was fortunately released as both a CD set and on videotape.

It remains to be seen, however, whether or not either or both of the Alagnas’ recorded interpretations will influence singers of the future as they themselves were influenced by singers of the past. Though it has become far more respectable to listen to recordings than it was forty years ago, there still remains the taint of “canned” performances versus “real” ones that many music students fret over.

And, inevitably, the amazing run the Alagnas had on records came to an end. The public simply tired of them being on everything, not because they weren’t good but because, like Toscanini, their record company (EMI) marketed them too much; and, in an era when fewer and fewer opera sets were being recorded anyway, they seemed to be too dominant.

An oasis in the desert: Virgin Classics

With the exception of independent labels like Hyperion, which in 2005 proposed raising its CD prices to a ridiculous \$25 per disc in order to be able to afford major artists in competition with the global monsters, and Naxos, which still churns out some truly mediocre modern performances along with a few very good ones and a growing, highly impressive historic catalog, the only modern record-label conglomerate that still has a strong commitment to classical music is Virgin Classics.

Launched in April 1988 by Richard Branson, the founder and director of Virgin Records, its aim is to record repertoire underrepresented by the established classical companies.

Virgin has a commitment to young artists and its early years saw classic recordings by Mikhail Pletnev, Steven Isserlis, Stephen Hough and Leif Ove Andsnes. In its first year Virgin Classics won a Gramophone award for best opera (the first recording of Britten’s “Paul Bunyan”) and has since won innumerable awards worldwide.

In 1992 Virgin Classics moved to EMI and began to profit from EMI’s global marketing and distribution. New artists

signed to the label included Norwegian cellist Truls Mork and, later, the bland but big-selling



conductor Paavo Järvi. In April 1998 Virgin Classics celebrated ten years of innovative recordings. Now based in Paris, Virgin Classics is proud of its artist roster. During the past twelve years some of the very greatest artists from around the world have recorded for Virgin, reflecting its commitment to young talent.

The Virgin catalogue is particularly rich in young French singers, choirs, orchestras, and conductors. French artists include Véronique Gens, Natalie Dessay, Ensemble Gilles Binchois, Dominique Vellard, Gérard Lesne, Patricia Petibon, Pierre Hantaï, Renaud Capuçon, La Simphonie du Marais, Marc Minkowski and Les Musiciens du Louvre-Grenoble, Roberto Alagna, Marie-Claire Alain, Gilles Cachemaille, Choeur et Orchestre de l'Opera National de Lyon, Choeur Gregorien du Val-de Grace Collard, Pascal Dubosc, Catherine Ducros, Ensemble Baroque de Limoges, Ensemble Intercontemporain, Ensemble Orchestral de Paris, Jean-Paul Fouchécourt, François Le Roux, Brigitte Lesne, Virginie Pochon, Jean Bernard Pommier, Anne Queffélec, Hugo Reyne, Michel Sénéchal, Jean-Yves Thibaudet, Yan Pascal Tortelier and Roger Vignoles.

Virgin has several catalogue lines specializing in French music. The *Musique à Versailles* series was devised by the Centre de Musique Baroque de Versailles (CMBV), a research institution that has made a name for itself the world over for its exciting discoveries of undeservedly forgotten treasures of French Baroque music. The works in this series of recordings were all selected from the CMBV's concert programs for the beauty of the scores and the outstanding artistic merit of the performers. The soloists and ensembles are all top-level artists such as Christophe Rousset and Les Talens Lyriques, Hervé Niquet and Le Concert Spirituel and Emmanuel Mandrin who directs Les Demoiselles de Saint-Cyr. The series provides a representative sample of all the kinds of music that flourished so magnificently in 17th- and 18th-century France, ranging from the exquisite intimacy of De Visée's lute music to the thrilling grandeur and inventiveness of Rameau's opera "Pigmal-ion," not forgetting a number of religious works whose profound spirituality has inspired truly uplifting performances.

Veritas is the period performance label of Virgin Classics with repertoire that extends from 11th-century polyphony to symphonic works by Brahms and Smetana. In 1992 recordings from EMI's early music label Reflexe became available to Veritas, which, along with Deutsch Grammophon's Archiv label and L'Oiseau-Lyre, now represents one of the largest collections of period performance recordings currently available. Artists such as Gustav Leonhardt, Roger Norrington, Andrew Parrott, Jordi Savall, Emma Kirkby and Monica Huggett are all well represented in the Veritas catalogue.



iPods and Downloadable Music

Now we arrive at the intersection of artificially-created music (mostly pop but also some classical and jazz), commerce, and a technology so advanced that to those of us from an

older generation, it is not only somewhat scary but indecipherable. Young listeners raised on the technology and its terms can comprehend these devices and their implications much more easily than those of us who are older. I will, however, do my best to translate what is happening technologically into real terms.

The first and most famous (or infamous) of non-disc music carriers was, and remains, Napster. Started in 1999 by a college dropout named Shawn Fanning, it was a program that allowed computer users to share and swap files, specifically music, through a centralized file server. His response to the complaints of the difficulty to finding and downloading music over the Net was to stay awake 60 straight hours writing the source code for a program that combined a music-search function with a file-sharing system and, to facilitate communication, instant messaging. Now we have Napster, and people are indignant.

The Recording Industry Association of America filed suit against Napster, charging them with tributary copyright infringement, meaning Napster was not accused of violating copyright itself but of contributing to and facilitating other people's infringement. However, Napster argued that because the actual files were never in Napster's possession, but transferred from user to user, that Napster was not acting illegally. The issue in P2P applications (Peer to Peer) is that if Napster is guilty of copyright infringement, then the consumers of Napster are guilty too. Likewise, if the consumers are not guilty, how can Napster be held responsible?

Now this tiny company of 50 employees in Redwood City, California was up against media empires like Universal, Sony and BMG, plus influential artists such as Dr. Dre and Metallica. The court battles continue and Napster's future hangs in the balance. Yet somehow, regardless of the outcome in the courtroom, Napster has opened a proverbial window of possibility on the Internet and more companies will spring up over time.

In testimony before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee on April 3, 2001, Napster Interim CEO Hank Barry called on Congress to enact an industry-wide license analogous to radio for the delivery of music over the Internet. He urged that such a license should include direct payment to artists similar to the "writer's share" of public performance payments that are collected by ASCAP and BMI. Barry stated, "Licensed music should now be available over the Internet as it is over the radio. I strongly believe such a change is necessary, an important step for the internet and that it will be good for artists, listeners and businesses."

Barry noted cogent arguments made by the RIAA in their quest to obtain an industry-wide license from music publishers with regard to Web streaming. In a petition to the Copyright Office, the RIAA, with regard to industry wide music publishing licenses, contended that an industry wide license would "avoid the need for individual negotiations on a scale that is unprecedented in the industry and thus facilitate the launch" of new Internet services.

Though the Napster controversy does not directly affect art music—as we have seen, the market share of this music today is far too small for anyone to care about—it has directly or indirectly influenced it. For, if any record company, from the mega-mega-corporations on down, cannot make money on their pop "superstars," there is no money to subsidize music that only a tiny minority care about. Art music went from minority to marginal to non-existent. The majority of art music lovers, being from the generation born 1955 or earlier (not coincidentally, the year that rock 'n' roll became big business for the first time), are for the most part but not entirely among the most affluent class; and as time has gone on, the more affluent members of this subclass have shown both a testiness and selfishness about not *wanting* to share their music with less affluent and/or younger listeners.



And, as if Napster weren't enough, the Apple Corporation soon invented a portable digital audio player called the iPod. (Hewlett-Packard also markets the product under the name Apple iPod + HP.) Devices in the iPod family offer a simple user interface designed around a central scroll wheel. Most iPod models store media on a built-in hard drive, while a lower-end model, iPod shuffle, relies on flash memory. To quote from the company's PR for the product:

Download exclusive tracks — from artists such as Eminem and Franz Ferdinand—you won't find anywhere else. Or jumpstart your digital music collection with iTunes Essentials organized by mood, artist or theme. And when you're browsing your own library, let MiniStore highlight albums and songs from the iTunes Music Store similar to what you've selected.

Feeling more bookish? Only the iTunes Music Store offers the complete six-volume Harry Potter audiobook series and the chance to own a collector's edition iPod. Customer reviews let you speak your mind and see what others have to say. The new Just For You section offers personalized recommendations. As always, the iTunes Music Store features musical Exclusives and Celebrity Playlists. And don't forget free podcasts — radio-style shows from major media and homegrown broadcasters alike — available from the iTunes Podcast Directory. Whatever your listening pleasure, iTunes has you covered.

Once you import and download all your music, iTunes lets you manage it any way you please. Create play lists to suit your mood. Use Smart Shuffle to adjust random playback to hear more of the songs you like. Set parental controls to ensure your kids hear only what they should. Sync everything—even Outlook contacts and calendars on Windows PCs—to your iPod. Share your tastes by publishing an iMix to the iTunes Music Store or streaming to your home stereo. Burn mix CDs,



complete with cover art. Discover new music with the built-in MiniStore. Find the perfect gift on iTunes. Buy and send songs, albums, play lists, music videos and TV shows as gifts to anyone with an email address, or print out a certificate with a redeemable code for your chosen gift. You can also pick up a pre-paid Music Card or iTunes Music Store gift certificate and let them choose for themselves.

With such devices, legal and borderline, designed to instantly download music tracks from the internet—both shared files already imbedded on the Net and files e-mailed between users—even the major record conglomerates are scrambling for cover. In 2006, EMI Classics announced that its very *last* complete opera recording, after 80 years of such production by the company, would be Wagner's "Parsifal" with tenor Plácido Domingo, and the only reason they were going ahead with that project was because Domingo himself was partly subsidizing the recording.

As a response to global competition on and offline, the Universal Music Group and the Concord Music Group announced an international distribution and licensing agreement in April of 2006. This new "unholy alliance," which insiders are already questioning as to its possible longevity, was designed to extend the reach and popularity of Concord's diverse roster of artists and historic music catalogue. Among the few artists in this roster who appeal to lovers of art music are jazz musicians: Chick Corea, Sergio Mendes, Miles Davis, Cannonball Adderley, Sarah Vaughan, Dave Brubeck, Oscar Peterson and Chet Baker.

And, perhaps as a footnote to this entire mess, Naxos—the little record label which has risen to a place of prominence due to both artistic commitment on the part of ownership and a thumping lack of competition—removed its free streaming audio of all its classical and jazz releases in 2005, making them part of a subscription-only service. Even the little guys have been hit hard by the download mania.

The last and most insidious technological assault on classical music was announced in June 2006, "download-only" classical albums—for a price, of course. Here, at last, the iPod-happy consumer can download performances online, pay the usual fee for a complete CD, and have nothing to show for it but .wav files that he or she can upload to their little iPod—to be replaced, I am sure, by yet another album or series of albums a month or two later. Thus the endless cycle of consumerism for its own sake, as opposed to cherished mementos of past performers to be savored throughout your life, is continued and promoted via the Yuppies' ultimate toy, the computer.

Yet another "format war": the SACD

The very latest technological toy, SACD, seems to me like something that is doomed to go the way of three-channel stereo or quadraphonic sound. SACD, which stands for Super Audio Compact Disc, is a read-only optical audio disc aimed at providing higher fidelity digital audio reproduction than the compact disc. Introduced in 1999, it was developed by Sony and Philips Electronics, the same companies that created the CD. SACD uses a very different technology from CD and DVD-Audio to encode its audio data, a 1-bit modulation process known as Direct Stream Digital at the very high sampling rate of 2.8224 megahertz.

SACDs must always contain a 2-channel stereo mix and may optionally contain a surround mix (usually the 5.1 layout) as well, but the so-called surround mix does not have to be in the 5.1 format. The old quadraphonic 4.0 format will do as well, most noticeably on the 2001 SACD release of Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*. The correct designation for the surr-

ound part of a SACD is “multi-channel,” and usually has its own “Multi-Ch” logo on the back cover.

There are three types of SACDs:

- Hybrid: The most popular of the three types, hybrid discs include an audio CD “Red Book” layer compatible with Compact Disc players, dubbed the “CD layer,” and a 4.7 GB SACD layer, dubbed the “HD layer.”

- Single layer: Physically a DVD-5 DVD, a single layer SACD includes a 4.7 GB SACD layer with no CD layer (i.e. one HD layer only). This type is often used by Sony.

- Dual layer: Physically a DVD-9 DVD, a dual layer SACD includes two SACD layers with no CD layer (i.e. two HD layers). This type is rarely used.

There has been a format war between Super Audio CD and DVD-Audio similar to that between VHS and Beta in the VCR field. Another factor is the double-sided DualDisc product which contains CD audio on one side and either DVD video or DVD audio on the other side. Arguably as a result of there being two high-definition audio disc formats, each with their own exclusive titles, in what is likely a fairly small market that regards higher audio quality as important, these formats have mainly captured the interest only of audiophiles, with relatively little mass market acceptance.

More importantly, many sound techies are convinced that the sound of an SACD is vastly inferior to that of a DVD. The following are quoted from such an engineer, Ing. Öhman, in the Swedish Audio Technical Society Journal and found at Elliott Sound Products’ website, <http://sound.westhost.com/cd-sacd-dvda.htm>:

It is nothing less than a tragedy that Sony/Philips system SACD still is considered to be a real competitor to DVD-A, though it has lower real resolution than the CD-system in the highest octave.

DVD-A does absolutely offer a much higher dynamic range than CD, but it is very questionable if SACD does. SACD in the high frequency range is quite mediocre, even compared to a good CD-system one-bit DAC, and of course clearly inferior to a CD-player with a real multi-bit converter. On the contrary, DVD-A is in theory 250 times better than the CD-system at all frequencies!

In today's reality, though, it is hard to achieve such hyper-resolution, but maybe in the future? If the potential exists, recording and playback technology can evolve. Today the DVD-A resolution is about 16 times better than the CD-system and the bandwidth extends up to 100 kHz to be compared with 22,050 Hz for CD.

Make your own – roll your own – produce it yourself

Following on the trends initiated by Duke Ellington in the early 1960s, when he began to subsidize or otherwise financially produce his own recordings, and composer Nancy Van de Vate in the 1980s with her very own record label, more and more artists of worth are turning to their own bank accounts to allow the fruits of their labels to be heard by others.

Undoubtedly, the two most famous names involved in this endeavor are American soprano Renée Fleming and Italian mezzo-soprano Cecilia Bartoli, who have sunk large amounts of their own money into their recordings in an effort to bring them to a wider market. In Fleming’s case, the artistic quality of her releases have been called into question, ranging as they do from an absolutely superb collection of Handel arias conducted by Harry Bicket to her highly-criticized performance of popular songs entitled “Haunted Heart,” but Bartoli has stunned the music world by acting in her dual role as singer and musicologist. Her albums of

arias by Antonio Vivaldi, Christoph Gluck and Antonio Scarlatti have virtually overturned previous conceptions (and misconceptions) that even practicing musicians and fellow-musicologists had about the quality of their operatic music. As an indirect result of her



musical explorations, Italian conductor Fabio Biondi researched, conducted and recorded the musically inventive and theatrically exciting Vivaldi opera, “Bajazet,” in 2005.

In the jazz world, such former giants as Toshiko Akiyoshi and David Murray are still struggling to produce their own records. So, too, are such superb but little-known artists as Jack Reilly, a pianist of the Bill Evans school who also writes and performs a great deal of “crossover” music, and trumpeter-bandleader Jack Walrath, once a Blue Note hopeful but now struggling to obtain live gigs in the U.S. (At this writing, Walrath has given up and disbanded permanently.) Both are at the point where

the larger part of their careers are behind them, but there still remain highly talented jazz musicians whose work goes unheard. One of many, trumpeter Mario Abney, leads an exciting hard-bop-cum-freeform jazz group that I heard perform at a Hilton hotel bar in Cincinnati. Their music was brilliant, at times excitingly original, but they not only have no label, they are lucky to even have an audience. On the night I heard Abney, there were twelve people in attendance, not counting the concert’s promoters and bartenders. Two of the twelve were eating dinner and reading books or newspapers while he was playing. Enervating as it was, jazz of this school has been reduced—like so much else in our culture—to the status of background music.

Norio Ohga’s dream continues – and becomes a nightmare

Sony’s power behind the throne, Norio Ohga, was not deterred by the problems that initially beset the Sony-BMG merger. On the contrary, he wanted that BMG-RCA catalog desperately. Having lost, through death, the crown jewel of his classical empire, Herbert von Karajan, he wanted the recordings of the only conductor Karajan considered greater than himself, Arturo Toscanini. In addition to the Karajan connection, there was another reason: Toscanini was the most revered conductor among his own Japanese people. Part of the Sony-BMG catalog is now devoted to re-re-issues of the Toscanini legacy, but those who have bought and even re-bought these recordings are holding their purse strings tight.



Undeterred, Ohga has plowed on, signing new artists to his four classical labels. Among the most promising of recent RCA signees is soprano Anja Harteros, the young German-Greek diva whose incendiary performances of Mozart and early Verdi have excited audiences

not only in Europe but also in New York and San Francisco. But Sony-BMG has continued to run into problems, some of its own making and others that are peripheral to its activities. Not the least significant of these problems eventually came from a lawsuit filed by IMPALA, a consortium of independent CD labels. Founded in 2000 and virtually ignored by the mega-corps, IMPALA describes itself as a non-profit organization “with a scientific and artistic purpose to help independent record companies and music publishers organize themselves.” Among its 2,500 member labels are Beggars Group (UK), !K7 (Germany), Bonnier Amigo Music Group (Sweden), Cooking Vinyl (UK), Epitaph (US/NL), Playground, Gazelle (Sweden), Edel Music (Germany), Naïve (France), PIAS Group (Belgium), Red Bullet, Roadrunner (NL), V2 Music Group (UK), Wagram (France), as well as national trade associations from the UK (AIM), France (UPFI), Germany (VUT), Spain (UFI), Denmark (DUP), Norway (FONO), Sweden (SOM) and Israel (PIL)—absolutely none of which produce classical music.

In 2005, after negotiating new terms which no longer gave Bertelsman Music Group its 50-50 split, Sony’s merger with BMG became official and complete. The new Sony/BMG merger yielded new entities among distributors (Sony BMG Sales Enterprise) and in the categories of Latin (Sony BMG Norte), classical (Sony BMG Masterworks) and Christian (Provident-Integrity), according to the *Billboard* year in review. Bertelsman, suddenly lacking funds, began selling off its sheet music holdings to the highest bidders, while independent labels cringed at the power Sony-BMG had within the industry.

But in 2006, things began to unravel for the new giant. On July 17 of that year, according to the MDN Music News (<http://www.savage-radio.com/MDNMusicNews.html>), a landmark ruling handed down by the European Union's Court of First Instance in favor of the suit’s initiators, IMPALA, will set important legal and political precedents. The court overturned the European Commission's 2004 authorization of the Sony/BMG music merger. The Luxembourg Court pointed out that the Commission's analysis of the Sony-BMG case was left wanting in various fundamental respects. It contained a series of legal and economic errors which renders the decision null and void.

The Commission waved the merger through unconditionally in 2004, creating the world's second largest music company and putting 80% of the worldwide music market into the hands of four media conglomerates despite widespread industry objection and previous market assessments that further concentration could not be tolerated. The independents highlighted a catalogue of fundamental mistakes which left the Court in no doubt that it had to overturn the Commission's approval. The Court also ordered the Commission to pay three quarters of IMPALA's costs.

IMPALA members and supporters sang with glee of this legal victory. MDN Music News crowed, “This is a victory for music and cultural diversity. It is the start of market recovery. The independents take the view that the judgment underlines the need for any assessment of mergers in creative sectors to take into account the economic, social and cultural specificities of markets. IMPALA had made the case to the Court that the merger clearance process is biased towards large corporations and lacks transparency. Third parties who oppose a merger have few rights compared to the notifying parties. They also have extremely limited access to the Commission's file. This makes proper decision-making very difficult.”

“The indies have really punched above their weight,” said Paul Brindley, managing director of the digital music consultancy MusicAlly. “It shows that despite having very scarce resources, the indie labels can have a major impact and make their voices heard.” It was not the first victory for independent music groups. In 2000, lobbying from IMPALA and other

groups helped torpedo an earlier proposed EMI-Warner Music merger. But until Thursday's ruling, the industry looked to be heading towards three majors, down from six in 1998.

What will happen next -- for Sony BMG, for Warner and EMI, and for the industry -- is far from clear. The parties will now have to consider their options. An appeal to the EU's highest court, also in Luxembourg, would be difficult as it can only be made on grounds of law. The merger will go back to the Commission but the independents believe that the problems highlighted by the Court right across the music market are too fundamental to be repaired. Without competition clearance Sony/BMG would have to dismantle. The Court's ruling will also thwart any other attempts to merge such as between EMI and Warner. It now looks extremely unlikely that they would obtain the competition clearances necessary. IMPALA will continue to oppose any further concentration.

But as we have seen, the triumphant underdogs of yesteryear, Gennett Records excepted, tend to become the multi-headed media hydras of tomorrow. Given a bigger "market share," there is no question in my mind that art music is even more doomed now than it was before this decision. Greed and selfishness on both sides led to this confrontation in the first place, and greed plus an abhorrence of art music as a positive moral force will extinguish the light faster than you can say "Die Frau Ohne Schatten."

The decline of arts radio broadcasting

As classical and jazz music has declined in the record market, so too has it declined in the broadcast field. Over the past twenty years, PBS radio stations have turned more and more to the "easy listening" sort of classical because that is what their audience wants and demands. As one broadcaster for one such station (who shall remain anonymous) put it to me, classical music—and even classical concerts—are now merely considered a background for "cool drinks and hot prospects," meaning that it has become a sort of "dating bait" for men to show women how "cultured" and "sensitive" they are. Recently, the Public Library of Greater Cincinnati and Hamilton County has begun playing its local classical PBS station through its PA system—and has encountered strong negative feedback from patrons of the library, many of whom are ethnic minorities, as being "disrespectful" of their culture. But a library is a government-subsidized institution, not liable to local restrictions, and the library has pointed out that some of the music broadcast on PBS is written by composers of various ethnicities.

Yet, in a sense, they have a valid point. Jazz, as mentioned earlier, has literally curled up and died as a social construct. Part of the reason why jazz stayed alive as long as it did was that there was a fairly large percentage of the population that led a "jazz life"—laid-back, thoughtful, reflective, socially liberal in the best sense of the word—which has since disappeared in our Brave New World of corporate mindsets and workaholism. Where and how could one enjoy listening to jazz when jazz was, by its very nature, a non-visual experience? Jazz is for listening, deep listening. Its performers do not, for the most part, dance around the stage to the accompaniment of a light show. And so, like the symphonies and string quartets, its practitioners have struggled to attract audiences, and the PBS stations now relegate jazz to one hour a week, usually at midnight on weekends, and occasional sound bites in their weekly review programs.

And, as bad as PBS radio has gotten, PBS television has deteriorated even more. Where once we had quarterly programs (at least) featuring a major world symphony orchestra, a Metropolitan Opera performance, a major recitalist or chamber group, we are now restricted to one of each per year, if we're lucky. Soprano Karita Mattila's incendiary performance of

Strauss' "Salome," filmed in performance at the Metropolitan, was axed from broadcast schedules nationwide. PBS television is much more interested in filling air time with retrospectives on Lawrence Welk or their most popular program, "Antiques Road Show," in which stunned collectors are told that the lead rooster they bought from some old man for \$300 is actually gold gilt and worth \$5,000. For this is what drives people nowadays: monetary value, not deep-seated cultural worth.

The last and most insidious technological assault on classical music was announced in June 2006, "download-only" classical albums—for a price, of course. Here, at last, the iPod-happy consumer can download performances online, pay the usual fee for a complete CD, and have nothing to show for it but .wav files that he or she can upload to their little iPod—to be replaced, I am sure, by yet another album or series of albums a month or two later. Thus the endless cycle of consumerism for its own sake, as opposed to cherished mementos of past performers to be savored throughout your life, is continued and promoted via the Yuppies' ultimate toy, the computer.

Carl Sandburg, the last century's Renaissance Man, Poet Laureate, Lincoln biographer and man of the people, never relinquished his value of great culture. Neither did Ezra Pound, Allen Ginsberg, Lorraine Hansberry or Toni Morrison. In fact, Sandburg made these comments in 1956—comments that were even more pertinent a half-century later:

When the goal of a country is only happiness and comfort there is danger.

Albert Einstein said as much... Why, he sounds like an old Swede! Listen: "To make a goal of comfort or happiness has never appealed to me."

All these things in the advertisements—anytime the main goal of life is to get them, so that they override your other motives, there's danger.¹

¹ *Carl Sandburg* by Harry Golden, World Publishing Co. © 1961, p. 96.